

Testimony in support:
LD 254, "An Act to Update the Sex Education and Consent Curriculum"
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

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By Jean Zimmerman, Augusta

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Jean Zimmerman and I am providing testimony as a private citizen. I taught health at Bonny Eagle High School for 10 years before joining the Maine Department of Education (MeDOE) in 2005 as the HIV Prevention Coordinator. I recently joined the Board of Directors at Maine Family Planning after retiring from Maine DOE a year ago.

I am here to speak in support of LD254.

I enjoyed teaching sexuality education to high school students while at Bonny Eagle, but there were some areas I struggled with, such as inclusive teaching practices and teaching about consent.

In my role as HIV Prevention Coordinator at the Maine DOE, workshops and training for educators was a key component of my work. Educators felt the HIV Prevention trainings were extremely beneficial. By 2011, a majority of schools in the State received trainings. Unfortunately, Federal funding for this position ended in 2013.

The Maine Learning Results have been in existence since 1997 for all eight content areas and the Health Education standards were recently revised in 2022. Schools are expected to follow these standards which includes the topic of family life education, also known as sexual health.

The major emphasis with these standards focuses on developing students' ability to find, understand and use information and services to inform health related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

The Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) which provides valuable information on how students are doing on a range of health outcomes, including sexual health. This survey offers some data on successes Maine has achieved. For example, in 2009 45% of Maine high school students had engaged in sexual intercourse compared with 35% of students in 2023.

There are also areas for improvement which shows the need for continued support.

- Condom use for sexually active students was 64% in 2009 compared with 50% in 2023.
- Individuals forced to have sexual contact was 12.3% in 2009 and 15.2% in 2023. Even with the legislation on teaching consent, this percentage increased. While consent education was included in Maine statute, additional training on consent is needed.
- Have you ever been tested for an STD was not asked in 2009 but was asked in 2023. Among sexually active students, 15.8% had been tested. This shows a need for more education about the importance of STD testing for teens who might not consider themselves to be at risk.

Much has changed in the 30 years since I started teaching sexuality education. Evidence-based curriculums are being utilized by health educators but more skills-based training is needed for the programs to be fully implemented.

What has not changed through the years is the importance of providing students with medically accurate information in order for them to make healthy sexual decisions.

Although most parents support their children receiving this information in school, parents have always had the right to review curriculum as well as opt their child out of attending certain classes.

I encourage you to support this bill, as its passage would provide more skill-based training for educators in the specialized area of comprehensive sexuality education and better outcomes for youth.